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INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000883

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/18/2017

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [EAID](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR FINDS OUT WHAT'S NEW IN STARIYE DOROGI

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

11. (C) Ambassador presided over a ceremony presenting humanitarian assistance to a hospital in Stariye Dorogi on October 16. The well-tended small town benefited recently from regime's largesse, but still faces demographic concerns. The existence of a private museum glorifying Belarusian nationalists offered proof of ongoing civil society activism. End summary.

All Appreciative of FSA-Funded Humanitarian Assistance

12. (SBU) Ambassador, Deputy Pol/Econ Chief and Pol FSN visited Stariye Dorogi (pop. 11,500), the capital of Starodorozhkiy district (pop. 24,000) in southeastern Minsk oblast. Ambassador spoke at a ceremony at the Stariye Dorogi Central District Hospital to mark the distribution of advanced medicine for those suffering from hypertension. Head Doctor Yadviga Leshkovich, Deputy District Executive Committee Chair Dmitriy Mikhailovich Davydov and Nadezhda Express NGO Director Mikhail Sobol all praised the assistance.

13. (SBU) Leshkovich characterized medicines provided by the GOB as sufficient, although Sobol noted separately that Leshkovich knew how to shake the bureaucracy and NGOs for extra assistance. Leshkovich pointed out new equipment in the hospital, including an Italian x-ray machine. The hospital offered anonymous HIV testing (to the extent possible in a small town), and there were several HIV/AIDS education posters posted in several locations. With 508 employees, the hospital was if anything over-staffed.

District Administration Insistent All is Well

14. (C) In a meeting with District Executive Committee Chair Vassiliy Petrovich Usik, Deputy for Ideology Valentina Ilyinichna Puchkovskaya and Davydov, Ambassador noted she hoped the USG could continue to provide assistance, including through the Farmer-to-Farmer volunteer program, which sent four American specialists to a dairy farm in the region in the past.

15. (C) Thanking Ambassador, Usik presented a rosy picture of his district, noting agricultural production increased two-fold over the past five years. He characterized support from President Lukashenko as going beyond economic development to ensure local residents "did not experience discomfort." He mentioned in particular cooperation between local schools and Minsk universities that helped 85 percent

of Stariye Dorogi graduates to pursue at least the equivalent of an associate's degree. He stated that 70 percent of those returned to the district. He claimed unemployment stood at just 0.5 percent.

¶6. (C) Lukashenko showed his personal support for the city during a 2002 visit to dedicate the new Palace of Culture. A tour revealed a large auditorium featuring pro-Lukashenko pop stars and weekend showings of American action flicks; a spiffy pool hall; a patriotic museum focused on WWII as well as temporary museum space currently housing an exhibit from the Chinese Embassy; and a state wedding chapel.

Future National Museum of Arts Under Milinkevich?

¶7. (C) A planned brief visit to a private museum at the residence of artist Andrey Beliy turned into an impromptu dedication ceremony for a Tadeusz Kosciuszko bronze attended by Aleksandr Milinkevich, the parents of imprisoned Malady Front leader Dmitriy Dashkevich and another dozen nationalist civil society activists. Beliy told Ambassador that he amassed his impressive art collection, which occupies several cabins he built on his property, in part because nationalist artists donated their works in hopes that his holdings could form the basis for the National Art Museum under a pro-democratic regime.

Comment: How You Gonna Keep 'Em Down on the Farm?

¶8. (C) Stariye Dorogi demonstrates how Lukashenko gained popular support and why he still could lose it. With little to do, like most small towns, the completion of a large public work like the Palace of Culture certainly shows the

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regime can provide tangible results. Portraits of the president adorning all public facilities leave no doubt whom residents should thank.

¶9. (C) Even with this huge investment, locals -- like Belarusians as a whole -- do not seem willing to do their demographic duties to sustain the nation. The population of Stariye Dorogi fell by approximately 1,000 over the past decade. Everywhere we toured -- from an overstaffed hospital with empty cots, to a former day care closed because of reduced demand, to a wedding palace offering ceremonies four times as long as those in Minsk -- the exodus from the district was clear.

¶10. (C) That heavily subsidized housing and guaranteed employment cannot sustain Stariye Dorogi demonstrates that many Belarusians want something more. But with the average age at Beliy's surprise ceremony easily exceeding fifty, apparently young locals do not see anti-Lukashenko old-style nationalism as a superior alternative to going with the pro-Lukashenko flow.

STEWART